

DEATH AND LOVE IN THE POETRY OF

DYLAN THOMAS

by

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INTRODUCTION

The astonishing popularity of Dylan Thomas and his difficult poetry has in the last twenty years made a legend of the poet's life and obscured the fact that there has been very little said about his poetry. A great deal of what has been written about Thomas is not criticism at all, but rather a series of appreciations, interviews, and sketches about Thomas the man, culminating in what John Malcolm Brinnin called an "intimate journal," his embarrassingly personal account of Dylan Thomas in America (1955).

It is regrettable that so many of the articles written about Thomas by trustworthy poets and critics have been published in England in the smallest of the little magazines and, consequently, are not readily available to the reader in this country. Of the three book-length critical studies of the poetry, Henry Treece's Dylan Thomas (1949, written before Thomas published Deaths and Entrances) is now dated, but still interesting for its demonstration of Thomas's connections to literary tradition; Derek Stanford's Dylan Thomas (1954) is satisfactory as an introduction to the meanings of the poems, although the critic rarely attempts a full analysis and sometimes is unbelievably imperceptive; and only Elder Olson's The Poetry of Dylan Thomas (1954) presents a completely convincing analysis of Thomas' poetic technique.

Recognizing the limitations of the existing critical work on Thomas and acknowledging Olson's study to be the most reliable

authority to date, I intend to approach the poetry of Dylan Thomas from the viewpoint of a prevailing theme rather than poetic technique. I am interested in the problem of Thomas' preoccupation with death, in exploring his constant awareness of mortality, the attitudes he expresses toward it, and the actions which his poems advocate because of it. The basis for this investigation will be Thomas' poetry as it stands in the Collected Poems (1953). I shall refer to other materials only when they are necessary to illuminate the poems. I shall illustrate my argument with those poems which seem to me to offer the clearest statements of Thomas' varying attitudes toward death.

In analysing the evolution of a poet's ideas throughout the whole body of his work, the critic must not always insist on the importance of precise chronology. Especially when, as with Thomas, the critic finds it impossible to determine the duration of composition or the date of completion of a particular poem, he cannot attempt to order the development of an attitude according to an exact time sequence. We do not know the dates when "If I were tickled by the rub of love" and "When, like a running grave" were composed, but only that they were both published in 1934 (18 Poems) and that "The rub of love" appeared in a periodical earlier in the year.¹ With respect to the death theme as represented in the entirety of Thomas' poetic work, however, the statement of "The running grave" antedates the other. We do the poet a service when we recognize his right to explore again a point in his poetic logic which he has already passed; we are admitting that his development of attitudes is human, and not mechanically systematized. Perhaps

"The rub of love" was composed prior to "The running grave." It does not matter, however, especially since their publication dates were separated by, not a decade, but a few months. Let me make it clear, however, that with only a few exceptions we shall treat the poems in the order of publication.

It should not be necessary to re-emphasize a small and obvious, but important, distinction: criticism is concerned with the life of the poem and not the life of the poet. Whatever is expressed in a poem must not be taken as anything more than a poetic conviction, something proved in the poem, which may or may not carry over into the poet's life. We are interested in Thomas' attitude toward death only as he advances it through the poems.

The fifteen poems by means of which we will analyse Thomas' concept of death fall into three groups. The first group consists of poems which display an intense concern with the fact of death itself; the second deals with the kind of life which must be lived when death is an irrefutable fact; and the third describes the conditions under which life may exist on the other side of death. We will examine the poems in the following order:

Group 1--"The force that through the green fuse drives
the flower"
"When, like a running grave"
"If I were tickled by the rub of love"

Group 2--"Our eunuch dreams"
"I see the boys of summer"
"Find meat on bones"
"In the beginning"
"Love in the Asylum"
"When all my five and country senses see"
"Unluckily for a Death"

Group 3--"And death shall have no dominion"
"This bread I break"

"A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of
a Child in London"

"A Winter's Tale"

"Ballad of the Long-legged Bait"

Such a grouping suggests the thesis this paper is intended to prove: that Thomas' attitude toward death changed as his interest turned from a narrow absorption in the reality of dying to a wider concern with the possibilities for life. Whatever else is interesting about these poems, we will be concerned with them only for the specific purpose of analysing the evolution of Thomas' attitude toward death. As a result, we will have to examine some of them in detail, others only briefly. It is significant, however, that in every poem in this series death is seen in terms of or somehow connected with love.

... it will be "the heart."

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spleen of the flower," is a meditation about man's relation to
the universe and to the forces of creation and destruction. In
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same force brings about both creation and destruction. The attri-
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I. THE RUNNING GRAVE

Even a casual reading of Thomas' poetry will reveal that he sees a relationship between death and love. In this study we shall be concerned with discovering the nature of this relationship and the influence of love on the poet's attitude toward death. We may best approach the problem by examining carefully a representative group of poems which deal with the love-death theme. Although each of the poems will involve both elements, it will be necessary to analyse Thomas' early view of death before we can see clearly the role of love. The setting for this chapter is "the grave"; in chapter two it will be "the heart."

An important characteristic of life is an individual's consciousness of death, particularly his own, by which he finds it necessary to search for the meaning of his own existence. With Thomas, death was an obsession which he communicated through the terrible images of destruction and decay in his poetry.

The Green Fuse.

His first published poem, "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower," is a meditation about man's relation to the universe and to the forces of creation and destruction. In this poem Thomas is saying that, in man as well as nature, the same force brings about both creation and destruction. The attributes of the force are motion and power, described in the initial

three lines of the first three stanzas. The force manifests itself chemically and mechanically in stanza one, making the flower bud from the stem and the body grow from infancy to age in the same way that fire or an electrical current burns through a fuse to ignite an explosive charge. The dynamite image continues, showing the destructive character of the life-explosion which finally obliterates man just as it "blasts the roots of trees." The implication of these lines is already clear: when a single force operates both to initiate and end life, the process of living is identical with the process of dying. There is no point at which life rises to a peak from which it begins to decline, for every activity of life is a movement toward death. The first explosion of life at birth is the beginning of death. This paradox is conveyed by the language of this stanza: the rose is "crooked," the youth in his "green age" is "bent" by the same "wintry fever."

In stanza two the simultaneity of life and death is again expressed in a series of parallels. A single force not only moves water through a river channel and blood through the circulatory system but also dries the rivers at their source (where they "mouth" water from smaller streams) and coagulates the blood.

The force becomes more specific and more anthropomorphic in stanza three, where it is "The hand" which both shapes and limits. The hand's creative activities are ultimately destructive, for the objects it makes and controls are destructive. The hand creates the suction which results in a whirlpool or in quicksand, both of which become destructive in themselves. "Quicksand," a pun, refers also to the initially inorganic human body, itself open to destruc-

tion as soon as it has been charged with the force. In addition, the hand controls lesser forces, the wind and the human will. Man is like a ship, his will the "shroud sail" which directs him. But the hand "ropes the blowing wind" and changes the direction of ("hauls") the sails which man has set in position. The pun on "shroud sail" suggests that the will under which man acts is the means to death and the sign of mortality. Further, the hand has decreed not only that life destroy itself but that men destroy themselves to kill each other. Not only is the lawbreaker legally murdered, but also the "hangman's lime" is made of human "clay." "Lime" connects vaguely with the nautical images by virtue of its use to bleach sails. Man sometimes gives his life ("clay") to justify his actions (to lime his sails, to whiten his willed motives). At this point the force is acting indirectly, but all the more subtly, through man, whose institutions of law and acts of will are simultaneously creative and destructive.

Finally, in stanza four, the force is identified as "The lips of time." Time is the power which creates and destroys both life and, as we see in this stanza, love. (That love is mentioned at this climactic point when the omnipotent force is named is most significant. Love is important because it is central to life.) Again Thomas attributes a dual nature to time, the ambiguity of "leech" making it a parasite as well as a purifier. Time dries up the fountain and man's sexual power ("fountain head"), yet it cleanses the water and the body. Wounded by time, love bleeds, but will likewise be purified.

The "refrain" lines in this stanza become important because they do not, as before, involve a comparison. Rather they describe time's most significant act: "time has ticked a heaven round the stars." The passage of time has made a timeless state possible, just as anything which exists must also somewhere not exist. Time, in creating heaven, its opposite, is the supreme force in the universe, the first cause. Heaven is outside the known reality (beyond the stars); it encompasses all creation; yet because it is created by time, heaven is subordinate to it. Timelessness is a state, and it is static; whereas time is a force, dynamic and moving. Time is a force of this world and the creator of another, and only in time and in this world are human problems relevant.

The poem closes on two lines which qualify some of the previous statements. Love and lovers, wounded by time, are entombed. When love is most creative, it destroys lovers the most efficiently: the bed is a "tomb," the bedsheet, a shroud. Even while the illusion of life persists, the "crooked worm," eternally present in the flesh, attacks. It is most in evidence at the very moment when life and love are felt the most strongly--after sexual experience. Love is death for the lover. There can hardly be a stronger statement of the extent to which death inheres in life than this one.

Throughout the poem there are indications that Thomas conceived the forces of life and death to be identical. Certainly that is the idea which lies behind the balanced structure. We note in the fourth stanza that the parallelism established in the preceding three stanzas is absent. On closer inspection we

see that structural variation begins in lines four and five of the third stanza, where the force begins to operate indirectly on man through other men. These variations emphasize a shift in meaning which modifies the entire statement of the poem. There is a logical reason for such a change. The proposition that a single force creates and destroys simultaneously may be true; it explains life and death according to the law of the conservation of matter and energy. But this assertion means not only that life is movement toward death, which is what Thomas certainly intended to say, but also that death is constantly being transformed into life. There is little evidence in this or any other of his early poems that Thomas recognized or would admit this second implication of his thesis. In the poem, life is created, true, but out of nothingness; and whatever dies descends into nothingness. Each stanza ends with an image of destruction: youth is crippled; springs are sucked dry; the body becomes lime to destroy another body; time has created a static heaven; the worm eats the living flesh.

More importantly, about each of these phenomena, the speaker says he is mute. His muteness results from the necessary attempt to bring into total consciousness that vague knowledge about the world which engenders the fear of death. But when the facts become known, they are too terrible to voice. The speaker is dumb, speechless before the reality of death. He cannot work out a resolution because the problem in its entirety is greater than he could guess and its solution will not fit into his original scheme. He cannot accept life in time because it is nothing but the swift race into death, the growth toward stillness (of which his mute-

ness is foreknowledge). Outside time, there is only a static heaven,² in which all things are united in death. Death is a state in which individuality cannot exist: all life deteriorates into "clay." Death is the storehouse for a common mass of potential life which becomes individualized only in being created anew. In this world, time and death are paramount, and life has no meaning except in terms of death.

The speaker is not content to be an inhuman and indistinguishable particle of energy in another world. As a human being, he must realize life in this world, yet he is prevented from doing so. The end of the poem finds him in a state of desperation, for not only is action futile and even impossible, but also the contemplating mind is unable to communicate with nature, the body, mankind dead or alive, the cosmos, or even a lover like himself (the "crooked rose," the "veins," the "hanging man" and "hangman," the "weather's wind," the "lover's tomb"). He cannot confess the awful knowledge--"I saw time murder me"³--because he does not want to admit it to himself.

Everything that contains life is the medium in which operates the supreme force, time, whose only creation is death. Man, like all other life, is no more than the instrument of time. For him the meaning of life is controlled by the meaning of death.

Cadaver's Hunger.

In "The green fuse" Thomas presents time as the force that controls the universe and drives all life toward death. The "crooked worm" is death in life, the tangible evidence of the power of time; time makes itself objective in the state of death. In "When, like a running grave," time is personified as a hunter tracking down his prey, a tailor sewing a shroud for his customer, a runner who wins every race. Death, the mark of time on all of life, is Cadaver, the corpse in the flesh. Love, as the chief property of life, is in this poem doomed by the ascendancy of time and death.

The poem falls into two equal parts. The first five stanzas present the speaker's plea for deliverance from love, and the second five express his demand for sex as the only activity meaningful to a man who recognizes the constant approach of death. Aware of advancing age, the speaker has begun to doubt his virility and to lose the power to love. He describes himself as "timid in my tribe" and

Of love . . . barer than Cadaver's trap
Robbed of the foxy tongue, his footed tape
Of the bone inch.

That is, he has no more love than Death, or a skull, has a tongue; he cares for love no more than Cadaver cares for the body which he measures, tailor-wise, for the grave. Such an extreme wish is expressed when man becomes frightened by his awareness of the imminence of death. When death overtakes him ("When, like a running grave, time tracks you down"), terrifying things happen. The physical expression of love becomes painful because the object of desire becomes an object of fear: "Your calm and cuddled is a

scythe of hairs." Fearing the inevitable mutilation by woman, the lover becomes impotent and makes love intellectual. When sexual love is remembered at all ("hailed to the dome"), the lover either thinks it as foolish as a "turtle in a hearse" or romanticizes it into the image of a dead "turtle"dove laid out in state in his mind. When the physical aspect of love disappears, age the castrator is approaching to cut off life ("Comes, like a scissors stalking, tailor age").

The dramatic situation is established in stanza three, where the figures to whom the speaker addresses his plea and the objects from which he seeks deliverance are named. It is his head and heart, the "masters" who control him, whom he asks to spare him from love--the object of love and thoughts about love ("From maid and head": thus, from woman and from idealizations about women which exaggerate the value of the "maidenhead," from love of the body and of the mind). Already he sees himself as body. He finds it necessary to renounce love because death destroys its meaning and makes the lover impotent ("Heart of Cadaver's candle waxes thin": like a used candle, his physical being--flesh, the wax of the human candle--is burning out). The life process ends when there is no longer any motivation toward physical desire ("When blood, spade-handed, and the logic time/Drive children up like bruises to the thumb": when the heart beats, the womb fructifies senselessly, mechanically).

Stanzas four and five set forth the body's central reason for denying love when death is recognized. When he makes a good appearance, when he uses all his energies to advance his cause

("sunday faced, with dusters in my glove": the knuckle-dusters inside his boxing gloves⁴ making his blows forceful), the body may be able to triumph over death or at least face death with all his vigor ("Stride through Cadaver's country in my force"). He will not succumb without an effort in self-defense, as will his "pickbrain masters" who deny physical passion ("Despair of blood") and communicate only through the intellect by "morsing on the stone" (by tapping in Morse code on a philosopher's stone and thus abstracting the impulses of the body into a meaningless intellectual game). In rejecting the physical approach to life, the "masters" become impotent and wasted by age: they "Halt among eunuchs, and the nitric stain/On fork and face." In contrast, the body--blind, perhaps, but bravely arrogant ("the chaser, the man with the cockshut eye")--hopes to retain his physical forcefulness and to escape death. He will avoid wearing his shroud ("time's jacket or the coat of ice") by refusing to allow the "scissors stalking tailor age" to cut a buttonhole ("virgin o") in it. If age cannot make the life of the body virginally empty, time will be unable to fasten him into the shroud and the "straight grave."

Stanza six begins with the retort of the head and heart: "Time is a foolish fancy, time and fool." But when the intellect suggests that his concept of time is false, the body points out that time controls all action. Like an auctioneer with his gavel and an officer at an airport control tower, time gives orders, pronouncing the end of physical desire and capacity in both sexes. The body declares:

No, no, you lover skull, descending hammer
 Descends, my masters, on the entered honour,
 You hero skull, Cadaver in the hangar
 Tells the stick, 'fail.'

Still insisting on intellectualized love, the mind's argument is futile against the logic of the body.

The next point in the body's argument describes the one kind of pleasure possible to man overshadowed by death. Joy, he tells his head and heart, is not a polite emotion which waits to be invited into the consciousness ("is no knocking nation"); it is instinctive, and physical. Further, it is impossible to enjoy physical pleasure by abstracting sexual images from the environment, by hoping to respond vicariously to physical connections, heat, or movement exhibited by the combination of cells ("the cancer's fusion"), the meeting of a feather with the forked branches of a tree ("the summer feather/Lit on the cuddled tree"), the feverish climax of an illness ("the cross of fever"), or the passage of man through a tunnel he has constructed ("city tar and subway bored to foster/Man through macadam"). These phantoms of sex are in themselves neither creative nor satisfying to the body.

In stanza eight the speaker as body makes a final denial of intellectual love. Addressing the intellect, he says:

I damp the wax lights in your tower dome.

 Love's twilit nation and the skull of state,
 Sir, is your doom.

He snuffs out the candles illuminating the corpse of love, the "turtle in a hearse" of stanza one which, romanticized and separated from the body, had ceased to live. There remains to the head and heart no hope for pleasure, for joy is not a "knocking

nation" but the brutal "knock of dust," the begetting of mortality by mortal men, the gift of life to the next generation through the death of the present one. This kind of joy is fruitful, creating new life ("the bud of Adam") out of the body, the instrument of death ("Cadaver's shoot/Of bud of Adam through his boxy shift"). When the body is allowed to seek pleasure, children grow from their parents like living plants from out of the grave.

The final two stanzas show that death is the fate of every mode of life, even of the man who lives in the body alone. "Everything ends"--everything but time is finite. The tower of a building or of sexual power has limits, the seasons of the year and of the body come to an end ("the leaning scene"), the light of life disappears with the sun on which it depends ("Ball of the foot depending from the sun"), the firm flesh ("the cemented skin") decays, and actions cease. In a world where everything is mortal, the only reaction possible is twofold: violent physical action against the force of time ("Have with the house of wind": in this case, as we have seen, by affirming the body when the body is at the point of decline) and acquiescence to the inevitable ("Give, summer, over"). When death taints all men, ("All, men my madmen, the unwholesome wind/With whistler's cough contagies"), when time will finally triumph over the fastest runner ("time on track/Shapes in a cinder death"), the doomed must yield to his fate. But this is only an attitude. In his actions he must be violent and assertive to the point of ignoring the runner who is about to overtake him. He must deny love whenever fear and age remove it from the physical, because all the life that remains to him re-

sides in his body. If in the contest between man and death the lover chooses to abandon sex and "take/The kissproof world," Cadaver wins "love for his trick." Though Cadaver takes all the tricks in the end, the forceful man can at least make him fight for them.

The poem resolves the tension between the two possible ways of continuing love under the curse of death in favor of the body. It is important to recognize that love is renounced only when it excludes sexual expression. The poem explores the effects and implications of death for the lover; it undertakes to solve the problem of love in terms of mortality, and it offers an answer. The solution remains, however, on the mortal level. There is no attempt to transcend or escape death. Death must be ignored, and this is possible because the body, in two ways, makes life for itself. Man as body purifies experience by occupying himself only with the essential drives of life, and he begets children.

In this poem we have again been dealing with the fear which results from the awareness of death. What was a mute fear in "The green fuse" however, is here expressed to the head and heart, personifications of two aspects of the speaker's personality. Because love is always controlled and finally overpowered by time, it inevitably loses its physical character. Arguing that love which is no longer physical is nothing, the speaker insists on physicality as the most satisfactory remnant of what was once an experience which involved his total being. In spite of the body's apparent confidence, however, there is reason for nothing but despair.

The Rub of Love.

The sense of overwhelming desperation that leads a man to center all his interests in the body which he knows must ultimately fail him and the frightening knowledge of the death which began at the moment of his conception⁵ pervade a third poem we must consider. "If I were tickled by the rub of love" turns on a fear felt so profoundly that it expresses itself in the inability to act. Thus the muteness engendered by fear ("The green fuse") becomes "muteness of action," the static state which is death in life. The poem is an attempt to conquer fear by finding something which makes life significant in spite of the inevitability of death.

As Elder Olson has pointed out,⁶ Thomas is punning on the Elizabethan meaning of "rub" as an obstacle to action. When he is contemplating suicide, Hamlet cannot take action because he fears the nightmares which might visit him in death. Thomas is saying that the obstacle love, if only it existed for him, could make him incapable of fearing death. As Hamlet's fear was an obstacle to action, Thomas' love would be an obstacle to fear. The subjunctive of wish recurring throughout the poem emphasizes the speaker's inability to love.

Love in this poem is always sexual love, the union of the elements (head, heart, and body) separated in the previous poem. If we consider the speaker in each of these poems to be the same figure at different points in his meditation on death and love, we see that the answer given in "The running grave" is unsatisfactory. Even total immersion in sex cannot stave off the aware-

ness and consequent fear of death. Moreover, sex alone becomes evil.

Throughout the beginning stanzas of the poem, the speaker wishes himself backward through time to those points in his experience in which he felt stimulated by life. In stanza one he recalls his conception, wishing that he might re-experience it. His mother would then steal him for her womb⁷ until the time when he would break through the weak bars ("straws"⁸) of his prison and sever the connecting cord ("bandaged string"). Birth, "the red tickle," would in both senses of the word be a "rub" for him: it would be an obstacle to fear and a stimulation to life. His first cry would be "a laughter from my lung" "set to scratch" by the "tickle" of birth. If, then, the wish to be born again were fulfilled, he would not fear sin ("the apple"), death ("the flood"), or the dangers of an adolescence still to come ("the bad blood of spring").

The speaker proceeds in stanza two to the innocent state of childhood. His imagined birth having been a fruitful experience (he was a ripe "plum"), his childhood is a time of growth toward healthy manhood. If this fiction were true, he would be too much immersed in life to fear death by execution, violence, or war.

The fact that he knows both of his illusions to be untrue does not prevent the speaker from formulating another. The setting in the next stanza is puberty, as sex-consciousness begins. Drawing mildly pornographic figures on the walls of buildings ("Shall it be male or female? say the fingers/That chalk the walls with green girls and their men."), the youth feels the first

physical sensations of sex, "the urchin hungers/Rehearsing heat upon a raw-edged nerve," although he is not yet actually conscious of sex (only his "fingers" draw). If, again, this dream were true, the speaker would have no fear. Here we find a complication of motive. His fear of death apparently is rooted in some vague feeling of sexual guilt. He fears "the muscling-in of love" and "the devil in the loin" as well as "the outspoken grave." When the sex act is described in the language of the criminal, when the sexual impulse is a diabolic tempter, and when both these ideas are connected with death, all is obviously not well with the lover.

It is no surprise to discover in the fourth stanza that the speaker is not "tickled by the lovers' rub." Sex smacks too much of death for him, especially since it cannot offset the approach of age and senility "That wipes away not crow's-foot nor the lock/Of sick old manhood on the fallen jaws." If, however, he could, as he wishes, affirm life through sex, he knows he would only hasten his end. Time and the ravages of disease and the brothel⁹ ("crabs and the sweethearting crib") would kill him, his vices engulf him.

Finally the speaker turns from the world of fantasy to the situation as it exists. The world is "half the devil's and my own," and he lives in the territory of hell. Hell is the place where man is addicted to sex as to a narcotic. The cravings which lead him to seek the illusion of ecstasy are followed by periods of agonizing torment which compel him to recognize the dissipation he has brought on himself. Impotence and death reside in him and the disease of sexuality rots his body ("An old man's shank one-

marrowed with my bone,/And all the herrings smelling in the sea"). Even as he watches, blood pulses beneath his fingernail, maintaining his life only to drive him on to death.

But, we are surprised to learn, "the worm beneath my nail/Wearing the quick away" is "the only rub that tickles." The admission of mortality, then, is the one thing which can obstruct the fear of death and make life seem worthwhile. If this conclusion seems more a rewording of the problem than an answer to it, consider the difference between awareness of death and admission of mortality. The one must inspire fear, the other may permit some measure of confidence. This stanza may seem to contradict all the proofs of Cadaver's existence in living matter, but it does not. The "rub" is the admission of death not only as the inescapable end of life but also as a part of life itself.

Life lived without awareness of death is bestial, the speaker concludes:

The knobbly ape that swings along his sex
From damp love-darkness and the nurse's twist
Can never raise the midnight of a chuckle.

For man, purely physical pleasure is meaningless because he need surmount no obstacles to achieve it. Human existence consists not of obstructions to fulfillment and of stimulation to overcome them. On the other hand, the admission of mortality must not be corrupted to imply a desire for death. When the "ape" becomes man and recognizes beauty, he must be careful not to idealize the facts of love and death, for these realities are as brutal and destructive as they are joyful and heroic.

In the last stanza the speaker elaborates on the character of

the "rub," asking if it be the tickle of death within the living body, the scratch of death inflicted by love, or the sacrifice of "Jack of Christ," who shared man's mortality and died for love. To him, Christ proves unsatisfactory as an example, perhaps because he was too human a god: "The words of death are dryer than his stiff." Significantly, it is not only Christ, but also death, who is denied by this equation. The question which begins the stanza is not rhetorical nor are the questions which follow it random associations. Rather, they set down the three areas in which death is most frightening: The body itself, the love relationship, and religious experience. In a line, the speaker dismisses the first and third of these only to confess, "My wordy wounds are printed with your hair." He has been wounded by time, which forced on him the awareness of death and his constant dying. Although he has only recently realized it, the wound was inflicted at birth, even at conception, and will never be healed. His admission of mortality, however, enables him to act, and he chooses to act as the lover. Because he is at last able to love, he has the power to transform his spilled blood into the words of poetry. The act of love is the one thing in his experience which can have meaning in terms of both life and death.

He concludes with a statement--grammatically a desire rather than an assertion--which summarizes the argument: "I would be tickled by the rub that is:/Man be my metaphor." There is accessible to him, though he has not achieved it, a "rub that tickles." The obstacle to dispel the fear of death, the stimulation to love life, is man: man as a mortal being who must live

now if ever, who must admit his mortality and live in spite of it, who must keep himself free for all the activities of life, especially love. The "rub" confers the ability to see life in terms of sexual love as life in which the measure of death is not yet absolute. In the face of death--of body, love, belief--the speaker reaffirms his self, his mortal self.

After the crisis at the end of stanza five ("the worm"), the tones of doubt and despair subside before the rising confidence which culminates in the hopeful ending. Death, which was feared less for itself than as proof of man's helplessness, continues; but fear is dispelled and action is possible. Love, again a possibility, evolves to replace the unrelieved sexuality of "The running grave." Human life becomes significant because of death. Man's awareness of death makes life precious, and his insistence on life makes him heroic.

Having studied more or less closely three representative poems from Thomas' first book, 18 Poems, we are now in a position to summarize his early ideas about death. He sees death as a state which is induced by the force of time. Not only is life the movement toward death, but the process of death begins with conception. Those moments in which energy is directed most strongly toward life are the very ones which invite death. The awareness of his own immanent and impending death generates in man a morbid fear, which leaves him mute and incapable of action. Even when he attempts to escape death by holding on to that which seems to involve some measure of life, his body, he is compelled to recognize the corpse in the flesh. If he insists on energetic sexual

activity as a representation of life as well as of death, he risks losing his appetite for sex itself. It is only by admitting the fact of mortality as necessary to the human condition that he overcomes his fear. At this point he frees himself for life and regains his physical power, directing it toward the fullness of love rather than sex alone.

II. THE SENSUAL HEART

When we recognize that, for Thomas, love is both creative and destructive, we recall that he saw time in terms of the same duality. There is a further resemblance between love and time, however: they are both universal forces. From the human point of view, time is primarily destructive because it brings about death; whereas love is primarily creative because, by making possible both meaningful existence and a new generation, it produces life. Because life and death are merely states of existence and non-existence, it is impossible to hope that life can triumph over death unless it is supported by a force comparable to that which brings about death. For Thomas, love is the force which stands in opposition to time. Man's task is to render himself open to love, to draw upon as much of its power as he is able. The poems we have considered so far are merely the beginning of this monumental activity, for the real importance of love has only just emerged. Now we must look at some of the poems in which Thomas develops the antithesis to time.

Thomas has moved from his original notion of time as the one fact of life and death to a new outlook in which creation and destruction reside simultaneously in each of two antithetical forces. Man is thus the instrument of love as well as time, and his life as well as death can be meaningful.

The Fit Fellows.

The speakers in "Our eunuch dreams" do not carry on a dialogue among themselves; as a body they argue against the misconceptions of the world. Having observed many evidences of sterile love, they begin to doubt both love and life. The poem is their attempt to distinguish between truth and falsehood, to determine whether love, after all, is possible.

The search for reality begins in the bedroom, where the "boys" admit that dreams are fictions. Again Thomas is equating love and life. The first stanza shows that as dreams are mere images of life, so erotic dreams are only shadows of love. They are "eunuchs" whose impotence is revealed in the light of reality, whose seed will never reach the womb. When man allows himself to succumb to "the tempters of the heart," he surrenders his ability to act independently. The dreams take over and dissipate his energy. It is the "eunuch dreams" who perform the act of love with the "dark brides." The dreamer seems a pervert who attains gratification merely by watching the actions of the imaginary figures he has summoned. Moreover, the "shades of girls" are emblems of death, emerging in darkness "from the worm,/The bones of men, the broken in their beds." Agents of Cadaver, they live in all men; they come as ghostly lovers, however, only to those who are too near death in mind or body to seek human fulfillment. The "girls" must be lifted from the grave by pulleys because the man who desires them is past action.

Dreams are false modes of life because they are both fruitless and death-like. The boys conclude that the denial of human

sexuality is the renunciation of life.

In the second section of the poem, the boys move into the daytime dream world of the cinema. Seated in the darkness of a theater, they find imitations of light and motion on the screen. Stimulated by observing the actions of imaginary figures, they are again in a dream situation. Instead of being alone in the bedroom, however, they are now in the company of other real people, all of whom admit, after the event, that movies are fantasy. But even though the figures on the screen are lifeless, "one-dimensioned ghosts . . . /Strange to our solid eye," their movement gives them the illusion of life. Like the film of a camera, the mind of the viewer is imprinted with their images: "They dance between their arclamps and our skull,/Impose their shots, showing the nights away"). The boys are objective, sensing in the celluloid phantoms the same lifelessness they found in the dream women. They reject cinematic eroticism ("love on a reel": fiction superimposed on reality) as a false kind of love because it, like dreams, sanctions passivity and is available only to those who submit to darkness.

In the third section the boys attempt to choose between the "eunuch dreams" and the "one-dimensioned ghosts": that is, between illusions created by the individual or by others for him. The boys soon realize that each of the "two sleepings" makes love impossible and prevents them from waking up to life in the real world. There is really no choice, for the "shapes of daylight" in the movies and the "night-geared" in dreams together embrace all of their experience, sleeping and awake. Either way out is

false. The motion pictures unite phantoms with the eye of the viewer, so that the eye-bride, blinded to love and life, is satisfied with "one-sided skins of truth." Nor will the "sleeper" immersed in dreams awake to the world of truth, for the dream figures sap his energy, drain him of faith in life and himself "That shrouded men might marrow as they fly." The boys realize that it is fatal to release the energies of life in dreams and motion pictures because these situations are lifeless and unreal. They know that love expressed in a fantasy will make the lover a "eunuch" or a "one-dimensioned ghost" just like the phantoms to which he responds.

Having denied the reality of both kinds of dream, the boys discover in part four that reality itself has been corrupted into a mass of fictions. By their meek ambivalence they have made it like the movie world ("the lying likeness of/Our strips of stuff") and the dream world ("that kicks the buried from their sack"). They have depended so long on illusions that their whole world has been overlaid with falsehood. Seeking the truth has made them realize that they will have to discard more than dreams and movies: they must relinquish all of life as they have known it.

The boys resolve the dilemma by revolting against the world of their experience and the dream world which supports it. They accept as reality only that which permits them to act, to be vigorous, violent, and assertive. In rejecting the dream, they deny also the loss of faith which characterizes the dreamer in section three. They will have faith enough in themselves to announce the dawn of a reality which they will create by renouncing the dark-

ness of dreams ("blowing the old dead back"); their true images of life ("shots") will destroy the illusions of the films ("smack/ The image from the plates"), thus converting negatives to positives and bringing darkness into the light. In this way they will be "fit fellows for a life," worthy of three-dimensioned existence. All who can survive such intensity of experience will not have to seek in dreams for "light and love." Their activities will be characterized by the light and motion which are lacking in dreams and which signify life.

The poem asserts that life exists only when lived forcefully. Although there is little suggestion that death haunts the body which has revolted from the dream world, death itself is not denied. The "fit fellows" obviously die: it is their memory which is praised as a worthy example for future generations of lovers, for whom the "fellows" have found the way to live and love.

Before we continue our exploration of Thomas' doctrine of love, we must consider the consequences which befall the "fit fellows" when the life they advocate is actually carried on. We shall refer briefly to two poems which demonstrate the dangers of living the passionate life.

Having decided on a valid way of responding to life, the "fit fellows" no longer seemed to reckon with death. The awareness of mortality reappears in the heroes of another poem, "I see the boys of summer."¹⁰ The "boys of summer" are really a later incarnation of the "fit fellows." They engage in the rigorous action urged by the "fellows," but they are troubled by

the fact of their mortality. Their actions, instead of being oriented toward life ("And we shall be fit fellows for a life"), are a direct confrontation of death ("We are the dark deniers"). Superficially the same, the motives of the "fellows" and the "boys" lead toward opposite ends. Seeking meaning in existence, the "fellows" plan to destroy the images of death which persist in life; but they do not challenge the reality of death. To the "boys of summer," the reality of life is not compatible with the fact of death; they "summon/Death from a summer woman" in an attempt to destroy death itself by uniting themselves with it and consequently making death die. They convince themselves that death is a reality only when it is feared, that it will cease to exist for those who challenge it. Recognizing the image of death in a woman, they seek to conquer death by overpowering her. They hope that death will not kill them if, through the "summer woman," they become its lovers.

Their way of life is more than vigorous: it is strenuous, exhausting, annihilating to all reserves of physical strength. Just as they seek death instead of running from it, all their actions reverse the common way of responding to the world. They challenge all the laws of nature in their march against its supreme law, time, whose final judgment is death. As self-made "deniers" of the "dark," they show the extremes of action which must be pursued to maintain life.

Yet in living at a higher pitch than either the "fellows" or the speaker in "The running grave" could have conceived, the "boys of summer" exhaust their capacity for both sex and love;

("Here love's damp muscle dries and dies,/Here break a kiss in no love's quarry"). Their necessary perversion of life corrupts love, the one activity which can support life for a time; consequently, the "boys" are doomed. There is, however, a note of hope in the final line ("O see the poles are kissing as they cross"), which suggests that a compromise between the "boys" and the critic who condemns their way of life¹¹ is not only possible, but the real solution. We may expect to find Thomas advocating the passionate life, as in "Our eunuch dreams," carried on with an awareness of both the reality of death and the power of love.

Before we examine the power of love, we may profit by referring briefly to a poem in which Thomas resolves the conflict between the "boys of summer" and their critic. "Find meat on bones" is a dialogue between a father, who might be one of the "boys" grown old, and his son, who finds the father's ideas about life impossible and absurd. Like the speaker in "The running grave," the father advocates rampant sexuality as the last assertion of a life which is obviously nearing its end. He is a harsher version of Yeats' "Wild Old Wicked Man," whom he echoes in his vocabulary, cadences, and wish to "forget it all awhile/Upon a woman's breast." Although the violence of sexual expression provides a temporary feeling of vitality for him, it destroys his partners. Still one of the "dark deniers," he recognizes death, knows time will triumph, but nevertheless chooses to ignore reality by challenging all the laws of the universe. He charges his son to:

'Rebel against the binding moon

And the parliament of sky,
 The kingcrafts of the wicked sea,
 Autocracy of night and day,
 Dictatorship of sun.
 Rebel against the flesh and bone,
 The word of the blood, the wily skin,
 And the maggot no man can slay.'

The son's answer recalls in some ways the attitude of despair at the beginning of "The rub of love." He looks and acts the role we would have expected from the older man. His desire for sexual experience has been satisfied by a single encounter with a girl, who, we feel, responded far more actively than he. The son is unable to challenge time or participate in the destructive kind of love which his father enjoys. It is not so much that he feels himself already in the power of death that he does not imitate his father, but rather that his spiritual self forces him to admit that life consists of more than the physical. The son confesses:

'The maggot that no man can kill
 And the man no rope can hang
 Rebel against my father's dream.

He refuses to kill time or life in order to retain his body and avoid waking from the dream which ignores death.

'I cannot murder, like a fool,
 Season and sunshine, grace and girl,
 Not can I smother the sweet waking.'

Here for the first time we find Thomas suggesting the possibility of a conscious life beyond the grave, a "sweet waking." With reference to all the sexual imagery in the poem, this phrase suggests the experience of lovers, who "wake" from the brutal physicality of sex to the infinitely tender and generous spirituality of love. With love, they both are rested by and rest from sex. Hence the reason for the son's unwillingness and inability

to continue his father's licentiousness: his more spiritual nature demands human expression on the level of love, a relationship of permanence which outlasts the transience of sex just as divine love continues beyond death. In the last stanza the poet comments on the foregoing dialogue with an ominous warning. To the father's shouts for the overturn of the universe,

'War on the spider and the wren!
War on the destiny of man!
Doom on the sun!'

he answers, "Before death takes you, O take back this." There can be no "sweet waking" for one who will not accept the laws of nature.

Thomas' allusions to religion are seldom more than vague. He is never bound by dogma, or even a specifically Christian attitude. His intense interest in nature and in man as microcosm suggests a kind of pantheism which is sometimes flexible enough to permit at least some extent of individuality: death, as we shall see in the next chapter, does not necessarily result in the obliteration of personality. In this poem, through both the son and his own comments in the final stanza, the poet reaffirms the natural laws against which the "boys of summer" revolted. For those who would deny the darkness of death and substitute for the sunlight of truth a shadowy fiction, he has an even bolder retort: "Light and dark are no enemies/But one companion." These lines suggest an acceptance of the idea with which "The green fuse" began: That life and death are aspects of the same process.

Thomas has not returned to his original thesis untouched by intervening experience. Taken together, his poems show the ster-

ility of mere sexuality, the folly of contradicting the order of the universe, and the danger in either ignoring death or inviting it. On the other hand, the poet has developed for the "fit fellows" the partially satisfactory solution that life is to be lived fervently. Against the mute lover of "The green fuse," the sexual man of "The running grave," and the "dark deniers," he sets the courageous lover of "The rub of love," the passionate boys who reject "eunuch dreams," and the son who fails to "Find meat on bones." As we will see further in his other poems, Thomas feels that the business of life is to be absorbed in life, especially in fruitful love.

The Holy Lucky Body.

We have seen that Thomas believes that both awareness of death and the will to fervent action are necessary for the achievement of love and life. In "Our eunuch dreams" love and light were to conquer death and darkness; in "The boys of summer" this hope was perverted; and finally, in "Find meat on bones," the perversion was denied, death was accepted, and love was defined as a force which is simultaneously sensual and spiritual. Love is no longer a weapon against time and death but a means to glorify life. Love and light make life equal to death, and not its victim or conquerer. The supreme authority for the existence of the force of love is the power which generated the universe.

Again we will profit from a brief consideration of two poems. The title "In the beginning" inevitably suggests the fourth word of Genesis: "In the beginning God." The creator described in

this poem is a benevolent ("one smile of light") power who left his imprint on the universe ("the pale signature,/Three-syllabled and starry as the smile"), charged it with life ("In the beginning was the mounting fire/That set alight the weathers from a spark"), and established its laws:

In the beginning was the word, the word
That from the solid bases of the light
Abstracted all the letters of the void;
And from the cloudy bases of the breath
The word flowed up, translating to the heart
First characters of birth and death.

The most important attributes of the creating power are wisdom and love. His conscious intellect ("In the beginning was the secret brain") had foreknowledge of creation ("The brain was celled and soldered in the thought/Before the pitch was forking to a sun": that is, before the divine cultivator hurled the sun on his "pitchfork" to its place in the heavens, before the "pitch" darkness was parted by the created light of the sun). Before creating man ("Before the veins were shaking in their sieve"), the power threw himself into the universe ("Blood shot and scattered to the winds of light/The ribbed original of love"). Thomas is saying that love is the force which created the universe and life is the manifestation of love. The old symbol of the rainbow ("the ribbed original") promises man that he can imitate divine love; that the closer he brings his love to the ideal, the more rewarding his life will become.

Even in a world that seems insane, the power of love can lift man out of his surroundings. The patient in "Love in the Asylum" is bound by all the limitations of the mortal condition.

He is further restrained by human actions, corrupted humanity having judged him a lunatic. In his cell he has a mystical vision which is really a proof of his sanity. The figure of a stranger, "A girl mad as birds" who "raves at her will," appears to him. By loving her, he is confident that he can, as she did, "delude the heaven-proof house" of his prison,

And taken by light in her arms at long and dear last
I may without fail
Suffer the first vision that set fire to the stars.

The poem portrays an angel of love interceding between tormented man and the higher reality, which as we have seen before is cosmic love.

This mystical communion occurring through the act of sex confronts the human lover with something more than the existence of an infinite power. He realizes also that human love can have spiritual qualities. Since he is, after all, still a member of this world, his obligation to love must be met in human terms, especially since human love can reflect the qualities of its model, "the ribbed original."

One of Thomas' best expressions of the necessity for human love is his sonnet, "When all my five and country senses see," a poem worthy of close examination. The break between the two sections of the poem occurs when Thomas shifts from suggested rhyme¹² to conventional rhyme, from the statement of the problem to his reaction to it.

When all my five and country senses see,
The fingers will forget green thumbs and mark
Now, through the halfmoon's vegetable eye,
Husk of young stars and handful zodiac,
Love in the frost is pared and wintered by,
The wispering ears will watch love drummed away

Down breeze and shell to a discordant beach,
 And, lashed to syllables, the lynx tongue cry
 That her fond wounds are mended bitterly.
 My nostrils see her breath burn like a bush.
 My one and noble heart has witnesses
 In all love's countries, that will grope awake;
 And when blind sleep drops on the spying senses,
 The heart is sensual, though five eyes break.

The subject of the poem is the fate of love. The lover is looking into the future, when all his senses will be compounded into the single sense of vision. The autumn images indicate that it is age which will bring about the decline of his senses. The visual capacity which alone will remain to him will reveal a terrible sight: the death of love itself. But, says the lover of the here and now, this kind of vision is blindness. Because it knows the necessity for love, his heart will generate new senses if ever the old ones are threatened. He will preserve love by keeping it sensual.

To understand all the implications of the poem, it is necessary to view it as an exploration of the paradox of sight and a definition of vision. The first stanza introduces images of fertility and sterility, antitheses forshadowing the opposition in the quatrain of sleep and blindness against wakefulness and sight. When all the senses see, the fingers will no longer fulfill their function of touch; nor will the ears hear, the tongue speak, the nostrils smell. The four senses which will be obliterated and transformed to eyes are only the "five and country senses"--the rustic, rude, commonplace, everyday senses. The new senses of vision, then, will be more refined and acute. But look at the fingers: no longer the talented gardeners, they are forgetting "green thumbs" and losing their productivity. Because they can-

not feel, they cannot shape or create; they can only passively "mark"; they are arrested, held inactive by a vision. They see through a glass darkly, for the lens is shattered ("halfmoon," "husk," "handful" are images of fragmentation): the eye of the moon, the stars, even the zodiac provide but partial vision. The fingers which planted and tended the ripening seeds, which brought in the harvest of love, are now stiffened by winter and the transforming vision. So love is "pared and wintered by": it is shorn of its protection, reduced in size, and put aside to be dried, saved, and rendered useless in its dormancy. There are no "green thumbs" to preserve it from wintry decay. Like the head and heart in "The running grave," these unfeeling fingers have made love an untouchable.

The lover's inability to feel is a sign of his impending death and, consequently, the death of love. His other senses are dying too. The "whispering ears" no longer hear; they too "watch," and it is love they see. The love which became ineffectual and sterile through being ignored by the fingers is now driven out of the barn and "drummed away," ignominiously ejected from the farm and fields on which it grew and forced to the "discordant beach." If her plaintive voice adds to the discord, the whispering, watching ears do not hear, cannot save her.

The "lynx tongue," however, cries. Significantly, it is past time for speech; the situation is so chaotic that only the instinctive roar of an animal is quick enough to respond. The tongue, nevertheless, as one of the five seeing senses (the lynx being noted for its acute sight), no longer has its traditional healing

power of speech. It can do no more than observe that the wounds inflicted on love, the "fond" wounds incurred through her indulgent affection, are "mended bitterly," are incapable of being healed.

Finally the "nostrils," too, see--see the "breath," the essence of love "burn like a bush." The dried and sterile love, rejected, tortured beyond recovery, succumbs to death. When the nostrils cannot smell the smoke, the fire brings complete destruction. But, the speaker reassures himself, love dies only in the "blind" sight of the body which has perverted or relinquished its physical functions. It is no matter that the bodily senses are corruptible because other senses belong to the heart, sleeping in "love's countries" all over the world until evoked by the misleading evidence of the false witnesses. These honest witnesses "grope awake," attain unto total sensibility: their witness involves more than sight. The seeing senses are prone to blindness and sleep; they can only "spy"; they do not "witness," testify, or respond to life. The sensual heart can save the body from its betraying senses, its "five eyes," because, "one and noble," it can unify and refine all of sensory experience into a complete expression of love.

Thus we find that the interpretation of the poem hinges on the "see" of line one. In terms of a somewhat mystical transmutation of the senses, to see is to be open to blindness; the "spying senses" succumb to "blind sleep." The situation is one of cause and result: given line one, the following nine are the inevitable consequence. When ignored or used for functions for which they were not intended, the body's senses become helpless

and love must die. The human expression of love cannot be achieved by denying the qualities of humanity.

We must not overlook the suggestions of religion in the poem. "See" read as "vision" suggests a religious interpretation. The references to astrology suggest a false faith. "Ears," "pared," "husk," bring to mind the parable of the wheat and the tares, as well as (in connection with "breeze") the first Psalm. "Wounds" recalls Christ, the personification of love. Love's death is the Old Testament story of the burning bush afire with God. "Witnesses" suggests the false witness forbidden in the Commandments and reinforces the demand to be true to the senses.

With this much evidence we may proceed to regard the poem as a close parallel to the mystical experience. It shows the senses first being used with concentration to achieve a specific goal and then being discarded as the goal is approached. In the first ten lines all senses are telescoped into one, sight, in order to achieve intensity of vision. They are cast off in the quatrain: "blind sleep drops" and the "five eyes break." Likewise the physical nature of love is gradually reduced to a burst of flame just as the mystic's senses subside at the moment of complete communion. The speaker is confronted by truth in the quatrain, when he becomes able to interpret the vision. He finds it to be a prophecy of the death of love, the very object of his mystical search. Thus he is convinced of the overwhelming necessity to preserve love.

This task, however, is beyond the empirical knowledge of the senses in their usual state. Sensuality alone makes love die with the cessation of the lover's sexual interest. On the other

hand, love dies also when the senses are discarded. Only the sensual heart, uniting man as a physical being with love as a spiritual ideal, has the power to preserve and glorify human love.

The idea that human love exists only when "the body is not bruised to pleasure soul" receives a more explicit statement in "Unluckily for a Death." Although the lover here is far more conscious of death than in the previous poem, he fears it not in the least. His relationship to death is unfortunate not for him but for death, who awaits him with desire. The lover can choose the object of his love from all the women on earth; or, in rejecting human activity, he can choose to love death. On the other hand, each individual manifestation of death can mate only with its predestined partner. There is "a death/Waiting" for every person. While the human body lives, its death must go unsatisfied. The lover who is totally immersed in his love is "lucky," for he can satisfy his desire. As a result, he is too interested in life to desire death before his time. His death, then, is frustrated and "unlucky."

The concept of the sexuality of death is central to the poem. Thomas expresses the desire of death for its destined body by means of a ghostly love relationship which reflects all the characteristics of human love. During the action of the poem, however, the body and its death remain separated by life.

The lover envisions death as two separate figures who are waiting eagerly for his life to be over. They are:

a death
 Waiting with phoenix under
 The pyre to be lighted of my sins and days,
 And . . . the woman in shades
 Saint carved and sensual among the scudding
 Dead and gone, dedicate(d) forever to my self.

"A death" and the "woman in shades" cannot be "lucky" until the lover dies on the funeral pyre of his accumulated "sins and days." Only by the lover's dying will his death become a fact and the shadowy "death" begin to exist. The phoenix rising out of the ashes of its old body is the lover transformed by death (into a "a death") and prepared for the second stage of dying, the bodiless but still sexual union with the "woman in shades." The female manifestation of death is a saintly mistress who resides chastely in the world of the dead, ever anticipating the time when her presently human love will be able to join her. She is faithful to him in spite of the fact that she has not known him as a lover. The speaker knows she is

dedicate(d) forever to my self
 Though the brawl of the kiss has not occurred
 On the clay cold mouth, on the fire
 Branded forehead, that could bind
 Her constant.

Although she has consecrated herself to him, he has failed to fulfill the condition necessary for their meeting. Because he will not prematurely undergo the fiery explosion of death that would release him into her love, his

winds of love (have not) broken wide
 To the wind . . .
 . . . that sighs for the seducer's coming
 In the sun strokes of summer.

Thus he makes her remain a nun, deciding that her love,

the choir and cloister
Of the wintry nunnery of the order of lust
Beneath my life,

is a ritual in which he is not yet interested.

Before we begin examining the kind of love which the speaker does enjoy, it will be necessary to draw together what we have said about the poem up to this point. There are four characters in this drama of death and love: two human lovers, "the woman in shades," and "a death," who is the figure the lover will become when life ends. To clarify the distinctions between persons, we may say that an individual's death has two aspects, male and female, who can become lovers only when the life to which they are connected has ended. The male half of the partnership is identical with the human lover except that he does not live; he is "a death/Waiting with phoenix" for the fire to do its work. The female partner is death in the form of a temptress who woos man in order to make him her lover. The process of dying involves destruction of the body in the fire from which the phoenix-spirit rises to "the woman in shades." While the lover still lives, the image of his death and the phoenix are two separate entities, the one being entirely without substance and the other consisting of his spiritual nature. As the lover dies, the two figures merge, the image of death being endowed with the purified spirit (phoenix). Since the spirit of which it is composed has a physical origin, the dead lover resembles the man he once was. Consequently, the desire for love continues after death and, by being satisfied, results in a kind of non-human life. "A death" is dead only so long as its human counterpart is alive. That which is death on

the human level is really the beginning of immortal life and love.

In this poem Thomas sees the human condition as a state of tension between two opposing answers to the need for love. Love can be fulfilled either in a relatively temporary relationship between human beings or in a permanent union of the self with eternal forces. Obviously the latter course is more advantageous in terms of absolutes. But the man who has the choice is human and limited to the human viewpoint. He is concerned less that human love is necessarily mortal than that the surrender to death sacrifices the only self and life he knows.

Although the poem is charged with mystical and semi-religious meaning, it ends, like "Five and country senses," by professing the necessity for human love. The idea of love in death, though it tends to negate the fear of death, does not appeal to the lover as an immediate possibility. The lover's insistence on retaining his humanity is a proof of the satisfaction he already finds in love.

Let us turn again to the poem for evidence about this elaborate argument. While death waits "unluckily," the body is exulting in love:

Loving on this sea banded guilt
My holy lucky body
Under the cloud against love is caught and held and kissed
In the mill of the midst
Of the descending day.

Though the earth is sinful, the body is not; though life is declining, love is not. The lovers' folly is not foolish at all:

the dark our folly
Cut to the still star in the order of the quick
But blessed by such heroic hosts in your every

Inch and glance that the wound
Is certain god, and the ceremony of souls
Is celebrated there, and communion between suns.

Penetrating the darkness of the body, the lover's assault discovers an instant of eternity in the flesh ("the still star in the order of the quick"). The sexual "wound," accompanied by the tenderness of love, is divinely beneficent ("Is certain god": good). In the moment of climax, sex becomes a mystery, the moment of supreme light, even a sacrament. The lover who finds such heroic spirituality within sexual love refuses to be wooed by death:

Never shall my self chant
About the saint in shades while the endless breviary
Turns of your prayed flesh, nor shall I shoo the bird below me:
The death bidding two lie lonely.

He has found saintliness in a mortal woman, and he will worship at her altar. As long as his love remains alive to inspire him, he will ignore both "the saint in shades" and the phoenix.

At this point the lover has a triple vision of "the tigron in tears," "the wanting nun saint" and "the unfired phoenix," all of whom are frustrated in one way or another. The first section of the stanza falls into the wordy obscurity which frequently mars Thomas' poems. We can puzzle out little more than an image of a tiger fish, whose tears reveal that he is stranded out of water in sterile (because sexless) darkness. The tigron seems to be first among a welter of beasts who are moving toward their doom, who are the sterile parents of strange, destructive offspring. Beyond this, it is impossible to divine what the poet intended to say.

The perspective sharpens in the second part of the vision,

where the speaker describes the "saint carved in a garb of shades" more explicitly than before as a

symbol of desire beyond my hours
And guilts, great crotch and giant
Continence.

We discover that the antithetical aspects of deathly love are the sensual-spiritual duality of human love taken to the absolute. This is a mode of love inaccessible and undesirable to one whose life has not yet come close to death.

The third member of the vision is

the unfired phoenix, herald
And heaven crier, arrow now of aspiring
And the renouncing of islands.

The phoenix can be fired only when the lover desires death and is willing to renounce the isolation he knows in life. His spiritual nature, the would-be lover of the "wanting nun saint," aspires to heaven, it is true; but the human nature which is his at the present moment demands that he live out his mortal life:

All love but for the full assemblage in flower
Of the living flesh is monstrous or immortal,
And the grave its daughters.

Love, the speaker insists, must be asserted on the human level, and it must be expressed physically. Any other use of love is perverted or beyond man's capacity and, therefore, destructive to life.

The speaker's knowledge derives from his experience with love, which teaches him instinctively that he will one day be able to know immortal love only if he expresses himself appropriately in the present. After all, he has been lucky enough to find a love which already has qualities of the divine, to

love a woman who enables him to apprehend the mysteries of life.

He tells his love that:

Love, my fate got luckily,
Teaches with no telling
That the phoenix' bid for heaven and the desire after
Death in the carved nunnery
Both shall fail if I bow not to your blessing
Nor walk in the cool of your mortal garden
With immortality at my side like Christ the sky.
This I know from the native
Tongue of your translating eyes. The young stars told me,
Hurling into beginning like Christ the child.
Lucklessly she must lie patient
And the vaulting bird be still. O my true love, hold me.
In your every inch and glance is the globe of genesis spun,
And the living earth your sons.

Their earthly love can be justified by precedent, for even Christ was human before he was divine. Moreover, the spirituality they have already achieved through sensual love permits them to create a "globe of genesis," a world of their own. For the time being at least, the lovers make (to paraphrase Donne as Thomas has echoed his thought) "one little world an everywhere." Together with other lovers like them, they create and preserve life, finding their way to heaven through the body.

We have come a long way from "The green fuse." Let us consider the means by which Thomas has taken us where we are. His early poetry demonstrated that death is the inevitable product of time, a force against which there seemed to be no weapon. The more Thomas struggled with the problem, the more his poems proved the presence of death in life. The recommendation of sex as the means to a limited measure of life led to extreme dissatisfaction. The portrayal of man as a figure heroic because of his mortality was perhaps the beginning of an answer, though it did not change the fact of death.

By asserting that man could justify his existence by living passionately even if he could not hope to conquer death, Thomas added a second element to his credo. This doctrine unfortunately led to its extreme, whereby man attempted to unleash his violence against the laws of the universe and to deny death. The correction of this ruinous attitude, which had again perverted love into mere sex, resulted in the discovery of the spiritual potentials within love. When the creative power of the universe was identified as love, Thomas had all the evidence he needed to conquer what remained of his fear of death. Against the power of time he opposed the newly verified power of love, thereby equalizing the tension between life and death. The power of love became the third and most important support for life, and it continued to offer man both physical and spiritual refreshment. As the simple love of the earlier poems tended to degenerate into sex, so the new and more complete love almost veered off into the totally mystical; but the poet retrieved it by insisting on both of its complementary elements. The idea of love as the activity of the sensual heart so enhanced its value that, in the poem we have just considered, it equals, and for human beings surpasses, the excellence of immortal love. When death can be forced into the position of a frustrated lover, even for a time, it is no longer superior to life. Life is still mortal, but the point at which death overtakes it is determined by love as well as time.

Thomas sought, and found in love, a power equal to time. The development of the attitude toward death in his poetry can be viewed as a dialectical progression in which the force of time,

objectified by death, comes to be opposed by the antithetical force of love, objectified by life. We must not expect either time or love, death or life, ultimately to triumph. Rather, the synthesis will reconcile the opposites into a meaningful whole. Human existence turns on both the "running grave" and the "sensual heart."

III. THE DOMINION OF DEATH

When love is a force equal in power with time, it is logical to assume that there can be life in death as well as death in life. We have seen this idea already in "Unluckily for a Death," where the mortal lover knows he will eventually experience immortal love. No matter on which side of the grave it appears, love is an evidence of life.

If both love and time are considered as power or energy, it is possible to explain the mystery of life and death by an analogy to physics. Love is that aspect of cosmic power which creates life and resides in the body until death. Time is the destructive aspect of the double power, influencing the body throughout life and finally causing death. Conception is the moment when energy enters the first cell of the body. Human life is a state in which activity is made possible by the destruction of the body; matter must be converted into energy so that the original charge of energy will not diminish. Death is the occasion when energy, having motivated the body to consume itself, escapes into a new body.

What man knows as death is only the complete absence of energy. The body is no more than a container for energy, without which human life cannot exist. Personality is consciousness of the energy which the body contains. Consequently, the purpose of life is to maintain the level of energy within the body, not

to preserve the body itself. Death changes the body, but the energy it frees remains constant.

Thomas wrote the scientific truth we have been discussing into one of the most popular of his poems, "And death shall have no dominion," which begins:

And death shall have no dominion.
Dead men naked they shall be one
With the man in the wind and the west moon;
When their bones are picked clean and the clean bones gone,
They shall have stars at elbow and foot;
Though they go mad they shall be sane,
Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again;
Though lovers be lost love shall not;
And death shall have no dominion.

Death has no dominion because the life force is constant. There is no destructive force, only the necessary withdrawal of the life force. Death is a human concept which does not exist in the larger framework of the universe, for each death produces a new life and each act by which the body destroys itself creates something elsewhere. Death is man's return of the life within himself to the universe from which he received it; it is, as Thomas says in "Holy Spring," "That one dark I owe my light."

We can understand this idea easily with reference to love. The expression of love is necessary to life; but also, because it requires the expenditure of energy, it destroys the body and invites death. At the same time, however, love is creative: children are born of it. It is a dual force which makes man live. When man the lover dies, the power within him is released to future generations of lovers; in a sense, he creates them just as he gives life to his own children. By being the lover he has maintained love in the world and by his death he has

enabled love to endure, both as a force and as an activity. Since the elemental energy which is essential to life can continue when the lover recognizes his obligation to confer on others the privilege he has enjoyed, nothing important is destroyed and death has no dominion. There is no death except for the body, and soon after the end of life there is no body. All that is vital remains actively in the universe.

The poem quoted in part above ends as follows:

Where blew a flower may a flower no more
Lift its head to the blows of the rain;
Though they be mad and dead as nails,
Heads of the characters hammer through daisies;
Break in the sun till the sun breaks down,
And death shall have no dominion.

The energy which rises from bodies in the tomb makes flowers grow over their graves. The daisies and the men they memorialize are successive manifestations of the same spirit. Moreover, they are both related to the flowers in the first two lines quoted. The dominion of death is not even the tomb, for the body returns to life as the flowers which decorate its own grave. When we see the same force present in both man and daisies, we are reminded of "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower." There are two important differences, however: in the earlier poem love is totally subject to death, and the lover fails to find any movement of energy from dying to gestating life.

In "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London," as in "Dominion," death is the moment when, for the individual,

the mankind making
Bird beast and flower
Fathering and all humbling darkness

Tells with silence the last light breaking
 And the still hour
 Is come of the sea tumbling in harness
 and the spirit

must enter again the round
 Zion of the water bead
 And the synagogue of the ear of corn.

Although death has no dominion in the universe, it has a very real place in man's mind. Death is a reality to the individual; for though he knows that the forces within him which make him alive are indestructible, he knows also that his consciousness of life has a physical origin and will die with his body. Because he does not find it comforting to regard his future self as an atom of the infinite power, death is a momentous thing for him.

Let us return to Thomas' characteristic hero, the lover, to see what meanings life and love must have in terms of the poet's more developed conception of death. In "This bread I break" Thomas has elaborated rather than changed his ideas about love. The religious celebration of love in "Unluckily for a Death" is here a virtual sacrament observed not only to enhance the relationship between lovers but also to continue the chain of life.

The poem is concerned with three kinds of nourishment: physical, spiritual, and sexual (which by now we recognize as a combination of the other two). Each instance of "eating" involves sacrifice and communion.

This bread I break was once the oat,
 This wine upon a foreign tree
 Plunged in its fruit;
 Man in the day or wind at night

Laid the crops low, broke the grape's joy.

Once in this wine the summer blood
Knocked in the flesh that decked the vine,
Once in this bread
The oat was merry in the wind;
Man broke the sun, pulled the wind down.

This flesh you break, this blood you let
Make desolation in the vein,
Were oat and grape
Born of the sensual root and sap;
My wine you drink, my bread you snap.

The first stanza refers to both the dinner table and the communion table. In each case, one form of life is destroyed so that another may thrive. The "oat" and "grape" and, on another level, the body and blood of Christ are both translated into bread and wine and sacrificed to man's appetite. Man's compassion for his victims, however, suggests that he experiences a feeling of communion with them.

The second stanza is an elaboration of the details in the first. The food man eats to maintain his body will sustain him because it once had a life of its own. The grape's pounding "blood" and the oat's "merry" actions once indicated their kinship to man, and Christ too was a man. The eater of bread and drinker of wine has done violence to life in the name of life; but he is also observing a sacrament because physical and spiritual energy travel from their donors to him through sacred food.

The act of love is also a sacrifice of both flesh and blood. Unlike the unfeeling oat and grape, the lovers "born of the sensual root and sap" must suffer the agony of the dying Christ in order to achieve communion.

The breaking of bread and drinking of wine--representing the

oat and grape, the body and blood of Christ, or the body and blood of the lover--constitute the sacramental symbol of a sacrifice already made and, in each case, made for love. The love of life for life, God for man, and lover for his love are all striking manifestations of the elemental force in that they all destroy in order to create. The sacrifice of one body permits salvation for another.

The love-time force which controls the universe, which makes man destroy life in order to live, compels him finally to destroy himself that the rest of the world may draw energy from him. The destruction in which man participates, both for and against himself, cannot be compared to the crazed actions of the "boys of summer." Sactioned by the laws of nature, this destruction is necessary.

The sacramental view of life and love has a beneficent effect on the lover. Not only does it endow his love with the aura of religious significance, but it also allows him to play an essential role in the universal process of life and death. He does not merely die; he dies that life may continue. Because he dies knowingly and unselfishly, he is heroic. We must not overlook the fact that he achieves significance through a love which embraces the extremes of human sacrifice and divine communion, a love both sensual and spiritual.

Although he comes to be a savior, man cannot save himself. His being will divide at death into the meaningless body and an unrecognizable spirit. Life's dominion is the entire universe, but the individual consciousness is finite.

Thomas discovered the way out of this impasse for the man in "A Winter's Tale." The intellectual framework for this poem derives from "Dominion," "This bread I break," and, to some extent, "Unluckily for a Death." We may summarize it as follows: the reality of death in human terms is a fact not to be challenged; there is no doubt that the body is lost forever; the nature of spiritual existence, however, is necessarily unknowable to those who are still living. In this poem Thomas is not concerned with the energy released through death and transferred directly into another organic structure. He might have been interested in the energy which reverts to the main current of power at large in the universe, or, in other words, the reunion of the spirit with a still somewhat pantheistic God.

As we have seen, union with the universe is achieved through death, especially sacrificial death. If death is, after all, only a man-made illusion, then it may be possible, and safe, to transcend human existence by seeking death. The man in the poem is one who acts on faith instead of evidence, who prefers error to inaction, who is willing to dare death in order to find life. His encounter with the cosmic power is, we are not surprised to find, sexual. Here again is a figure who must not be categorized with the "boys of summer." He does not seek death to challenge it: he is not even certain it is the final reality. His attitude toward death is one of desire which, fulfilled, will permit him to discover and respond to whatever ultimate power, if any, exists.

It will not be necessary to enter into a full analysis of this poem or the next because, like most of Thomas' later work,

they have none of the concentration of his early poetry. Rich detail replaces the difficult images which have demanded out close attention. We will concentrate here on the bare narrative of the "Tale," touching just enough to relate the poem to the ideas under discussion.

The poem is a legend, a tale told about a long-ago time of faith pure as the snow. The hero is praying fervently, desperately:

He knelt, he wept, he prayed,

 In the muffled house, in the quick of night,
 At the point of love, forsaken and afraid.

He appears to be on the verge of a vision. At the height of desire, however, he is alone, cold, and weeping.

He knelt on the cold stones,
 He wept from the crest of grief, he prayed to the veiled sky
 May his hunger go howling on bare white bones

 Into the home of prayers
 And fires.

He wants to sacrifice his body to death and to direct his desire heavenward. Agonizing in unsatisfied love, he is "the believer lost and the hurled outcast of light" who has not yet encountered "the bride bed forever sought." He prays for deliverance from his misery, for immersion in love; he would

cast his need
 Alone and naked in the engulfing bride,
 Never to flourish in the fields of the white seed
 Or flower under the time dying flesh astride.

Since the love he desires is outside the world and time, he will not plant his seed on earth or find joy in the flesh.

The action becomes a sort of sacred ritual, with all the surrounding scene breaking into music and dance. At this point the vision appears: "A she bird rose and rayed like a burning

bride./A she bird dawned, and her breast with snow and scarlet
downed." We see immediately that the mystical bird is the woman
to fill the "bride bed forever sought" and that the man's dark
night of the soul has passed through the vision into dawn.

The bird, the symbol of love, woos the longing man:

And the wild wings were raised
Above her folded head, and the soft feathered voice
Was flying through the house as though the she bird praised
And the sky of birds in the plumed voice charmed
Him up and he ran like a wind after the kindling flight.

Because human lovers cannot know absolute love, the man must give
up his life in order to win his burning bride. This he was willing
to do from the beginning. We are reminded of the lines in "Unluck-
ily for a Death":

All love but for the full assemblage in flower
Of the living flesh is monstrous or immortal,
And the grave its daughters.

The man in this poem is ready for death; in fact, he has been
actively seeking it. His love of the "she bird" is not "monstrous"
but "immortal." Through it he is resurrected to a higher life:

For the bird lay bedded
In a choir of wings, as though she slept or died,
And the wings glided wide and he was hymned and wedded,
And through the thighs of the engulfing bride,
The woman-breasted and the heaven headed

Bird, he was brought low,
Burning in the bride bed of love, in the whirl-
Pool at the wanting centre, in the folds
Of paradise, in the spun bud of the world.
And she rose with him flowering in her melting snow.

Again we see, this time allegorically, that death is a purely
human concept, that it has no real dominion. The process of dying
actually renews life by translating that which lives into a new
form. This is the truth which was unacceptable to the lovers in

"Unluckily for a Death" and not fully grasped by the ones in "This bread I break." Here, the she bird, like the phoenix brings man through fire ("the burning bride bed of love") out of his mortal prison and into "the folds/Of paradise."

We have seen Thomas' attitude toward death change from morbid fear to disbelief according to which of the various forms of love, ranging from total sex to pure spirituality, was brought into conflict with it.¹³ It would be misleading to leave the question at this point, however, for "A Winter's Tale" is hardly Thomas' characteristic view of love. A better representation would be "When all my five and country senses see."

There is another poem, however, which deserves study on its own merits and which offers a solution to the man who has gone the distance of "A Winter's Tale" and still remains unsatisfied. "Ballad of the Long-legged Bait" deals with the spiritual and religious connotations of love characteristic of Thomas' later poetry and present, as we have seen,¹⁴ since 25 Poems. Yet it must be interpreted finally as a support for the doctrine of the sensual heart.

The narrative concerns the adventures of a fisherman and his "long-legged bait" from the time the boat leaves the shore under a chorus of farewells until the end of the strange voyage. Just as the boat is almost out of sight, the fisherman casts his rod. The ships in the harbor "saw him throw to the swift flood/ A girl alive with his hooks through her lips." The bait is a girl whom the fisherman is sacrificing to the waves and fishes;

moreover, with the sexual suggestions inherent in the manner of baiting a hook, he is casting off his sexuality. As we know from so many others of Thomas' poems, the renunciation of sex is certain death. The man in "A Winter's Tale" discarded everything except sex in his effort to find eternal love; and, as a result, death was not a reality for him. The fisherman also is seeking immortality, but by denying sex he is courting death.

No sooner is the bait cast into the sea than the fisherman loses all interest in the land and human concerns: "He was blind to the eyes of candles/In the praying windows of waves." He watches his bait, which seems to be inordinately effective for the use he makes of her. She attracts the fish sexually with such force that soon the whole sea is rocking in response to her. Whales, the kings of the sea, pursue her; and finally all the sea life explodes in sexual ecstasy, "making under the green, laid veil/The long-legged beautiful bait their wives."

The underwater land ("Mountains and galleries beneath/Nightingale and hyena") praises the fisherman's success. Not only will his bait win him an enormous catch, but also he has managed to conquer the age-old elemental fact of mortality, physical desire:

Oh all the wanting flesh his enemy
Thrown to the sea in the shell of a girl
Is old as water and plain as an eel.

Again the sacramental element is part of the voyage toward immortality, for the bride-bait is a human sacrifice, of his love and himself, made to escape the devil. We doubt that it will make him able to commune with the infinite, however. His sacrifice

is the direct opposite of that made in "This bread I break."

The fisherman's perversion of the sensual approach to spirituality results from his guilt about sex. When the girl is sacrificed,

The tempter under the eyelid
Who shows to the selves asleep
Mast-high moon-white women naked
Walking in wishes and lovely for shame
Is dumb and gone with his flame of brides.
Sussanah's drowned in the bearded stream
And no-one stirs at Sheba's side
But the hungry kings of the tides.

The girl had been the epitome of the desirable woman: she was sensuality incarnate. In murdering sensuality, the fisherman was able to murder "Sin who had a woman's shape," the devil (his own sexuality), and Venus (who approved sex).

Voices of farewell are heard again, this time from the bait, ironically echoing farewells spoken from the land at the beginning of the voyage. The death of the bait, his cast-off sensuality, does indeed produce his own death: the fisherman will never return from this voyage. He "winds his reel/With no more desire than a ghost," dead now without his sensual nature. The catch he draws out of the water is a surprising one:

See what the gold gut drags from under
Mountains and galleries to the crest!
See what clings to hair and skull
As the boat skims on with drinking wings!
His decks are drenched with miracles.
Oh miracle of fishes! The long dead bite!
His fathers cling to the hand of the girl
And the dead hand leads the past,
Leads them as children and as air
On to the blindly tossing tops;
The centuries throw back their hair
And the old men sing from newborn lips.

The bait herself reappears, unassailed by death, leading the fisherman's ancestors from their watery grave. His catch is truly miraculous, for the old men live to deliver an oracular admonition. They "sing from new born lips":

Time is bearing another son.
Kill Time! She turns in her pain!
The oak is felled in the acorn
And the hawk in the egg kills the wren.

With the voice of the early Thomas, they warn the fisherman that he must conquer time because it predestines mortality, that the only satisfactory life is a timeless one.

And the fisherman is, in fact, about to escape time. With the next casting of his rod, his bait brings him the garden of Eden itself:

The rod bends low, diving land,
And through the sundered water crawls
A garden holding to her hand.

Life emerges from the sea to the fisherman only because it has been attracted by the bait. Even as they break the surface,

Insects and valleys hold her thighs hard,
Time and places grip her breast bone,
She is breaking with seasons and clouds;
Round her trailed wrist fresh water weaves.

The parting of the waters reveals a river, barley-sown fields, and grazing cattle: "The country tide is cobbled with towns." The world under the sea is a reincarnation of the land which the fisherman had abandoned. He is born again into life and the desire he had attempted to discard:

And the streets that the fisherman combed
When his long-legged flesh was a wind on fire
And his loin was a hunting flame
Coil from the thoroughfares of her hair
And terribly lead him home alive

Lead her prodigal home to his terror,
The furious ox-killing house of love.

Having undertaken the voyage to purge himself of "the wanting flesh his enemy," the fisherman finds after passing through death and arriving at his destination that love in the timeless world of Eden is still sensual. He reached the garden only by dying, but the bait lived throughout the voyage. In fact, she began really to live at the height of her power only after he had thrown her in the direction of death.

Mortification of the flesh may indeed win for man his salvation; but he is reborn to love which is, if anything, more intense than the desire he has known in life. Although the sacrificial offering of human sexuality is the most direct way out of this world, it is hardly the way to enter the next. The fisherman is a "prodigal" who unknowingly returns home to the "furious ox-killing house of love." Eden is the eternal manifestation of love, and as such the place where eternal life is lived.

The sea voyage toward the spiritual has ended in a new physicality: "There is nothing left of the sea but its sound." The fisherman's home is a land reached through the water as his life was reached through death. Had he not been the person he was, the voyage would have been as unnecessary for him as it was for the girl.

As the sun and moon wish him well from the world to which he will never return, the fisherman, accompanied by his bait, reaches his eternal home. The bait is now "his long-legged heart," the object of his desire:

Good-bye, good luck, struck the sun and the moon,
 To the fisherman lost on the land.
 He stands alone at the door of his home,
 With his long-legged heart in his hand.

The fisherman's experience is a series of paradoxes. He murders sex only to find it emerge alive, he responds to his own bait, his love for the sea leads him to land. His spiritual journey follows the same lines. Casting off the flesh to purify the soul happens to make salvation available to him, but in a way he had certainly not expected. Though not reciprocated, the desire of the flesh to rejoin the spiritual man renews their common life. It is only through the energy of the long-legged bait that the fisherman reaches Eden.

The implications which follow from the argument of the poem are very interesting. Not only does life continue after death, but it will differ from human experience only by being more intense. The centrality of love within eternal life and the sensual nature of this kind of love suggest that sexual expression on the human level is not sin but a pious preparation for the afterlife. The saving quality of sexual love resides in its capacity to unify man's sensual and spiritual drives. Thus in this poem Thomas is correcting the kind of response to death which demands a denial of the body to prepare the soul for a life outside the human condition. When death is a fact only in the limited human imagination, when the whole universe is a fusion of energy which is sexual in nature, human life can imitate the eternal only by insisting on its sensuality.

We are now in a position to state some conclusions which are somewhat different from those we reached at the end of the

preceding chapter. At that point we were able to say only that Thomas had conquered his early fear of death by finding in love a way to make life meaningful. We interpreted the development of his attitudes toward death and love in terms of a dialectical conflict between time and love, the two primary forces in the universe of his early poems.

In this last group of poems, which represents the synthesis of the dialectical action, Thomas admits that the opposition between love and time, and life and death, is a human concept which is valid only on earth. Although human love can make existence meaningful, it cannot prevent death; life is mortal because it is limited by time. But death is the final reality only in time. In the realm of the infinite, neither time nor death can exist.

Thomas resolves the dialectical conflict on the cosmic level, where the only reality is the single power of timeless love. This force represents the fusion of the lesser forces which operate on human life. The ultimate reality is absolute time, which is timeless, and absolute love, which is infinite and immortal.

Time and love have meaning on the human level, however, for in order to enter the timeless world, man must escape the human condition by assenting to the power of time. In order to merit eternal life, he must conduct his affairs on earth in harmony with the laws of the universe and in imitation of eternal love. He will achieve immortality through both death and love.

We must not permit our interpretation of the last few poems to obscure the evidence offered by Thomas' work as a whole. The possibility of immortal life in a religious sense is the central concern of only a very few poems. More often the poet is writing allegorically: "Ballad" is less about a spiritual voyage than about the necessity for the sensual heart. In other cases he is concerned primarily with the movement of energy in the universe, quite apart from any specific religious significance.

Even in the early poems, where his preoccupation with death is almost pathological, Thomas' real interest is in the attempt to find significant experience in life. By insisting on vigorous action and sensual love, he makes life meaningful and conquers his fear of death. For Thomas, life is man's opportunity to love, and love is the meaning of life. The human condition is worth the price of death.

The lover in Thomas' poetry comes to accept the limitations of life. He knows that "Though lovers die, love shall not"; though bodies die, life shall not. His death is the tragic necessity which keeps the universe alive. The weakling of "The green fuse" and the rebel of "The boys of summer" becomes in "This bread I break" the heroic priest at the altar of the sensual heart.

Country of Dylan Thomas, p. 24.

The unborn child is aware not only that he will be born to life but also that death already exists in him. In "Before I hatched" the embryo says:

My throat knew thirst before the structure
Of skin and vein around the cell
Where words and water make a mixture
Unfailing till the blood runs dead.

NOTES

1. New Verse, no. 10, August 1934.
2. The notion of a static heaven seems implicit in this poem. The working of time is always seen in terms of movement and expressed by explosively strong verbs: the force drives, blasts, whirls, stirs, ropes, hauls, leeches. When time has achieved its destructive end, the objects on which it operated are motionless: the crooked rose, bent youth, dried streams, wax blood, hanging man, entombed lover. The force endows objects with motion only to make them motionless in death, their final state. Thus we feel that after time "ticked a heaven round the stars," the ticking stopped, heaven was final, complete, and motionless--the appropriate setting for death.

This interpretation serves also to explain why the poet had to abandon his original conception of the unified force of creation and destruction. Since the idea of heaven implies life after death, a static heaven is unacceptable to one who knows life on earth as activity and motion. Even though the movement of life is in the direction of death, a measure of life yet remains--as it does not in the stillness of the tomb or a static heaven.

Furthermore, Thomas uses the contrast between motion and stillness in other poems: for example--"When, like a running grave," "If I were tickled by the rub of love," "Our eunuch dreams," "Twenty four years." In all of these poems life is equated with movement and death with stillness, and the evidence of death in life is always the inability to act.

3. From "Then was my neophyte."
4. I am indebted to Elder Olson for his explanation of this line and several others in the poem, which, I think, is certainly one of the most difficult of Thomas' successful poems. (The Poetry of Dylan Thomas, p. 94.)
5. The unborn child is aware not only that he will be born to die but also that death already exists in him. In "Before I knocked" the embryo says:

My throat knew thirst before the structure
Of skin and vein around the well
Where words and water make a mixture
Unfailing till the blood runs foul;

My heart knew love, my belly hunger;
I smelt the maggot in my stool.

6. Olson, p. 37.

7. "The idea is that a girl might steal him and put him into her womb. The same notion occurs in 'A Prospect of the Sea.' (Selected Writings, p. 109)" Ibid., p. 100.

8. Olson suggests that the straws refer both to rays of light and to the frail prison of the mother's body. Ibid., p. 101.

9. "Crib" used to mean brothel, Ibid., p. 98.

10. "Our eunuch dreams" and "I see the boys of summer were published two months apart in the order given. (New Verse, no. 8 and 9, April and June, 1934.)

11. The critic is the character in the poem who "see(s) the boys of summer in their ruin" and prompts them to defend their actions.

12. Thomas makes a practice of ending lines with words whose final sounds echo previous line endings. This suggestion of rhyme is usually ordered into a recognizable "rhyme" scheme. See: "I see the boys of summer," "A process in the weather of the heart," and many others.

13. Our study does not consider, however, poems like "Vision and Prayer" and "Altarwise by owl-light," which concern spiritual love in rather specific religious terms, because they have little to do with the problem of mortality as it relates to our investigation.

14. Of the poems we have referred to, the following involve the spirituality of love: "Find meat on bones," "Love in the Asylum," "When all my five and country senses see," "Unluckily for a Death," "This bread I break," "A Winter's Tale."

(A. D. N. 1934, 304).

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12.

13. "The Man, and Puffy." WINTER, 1 (October 1937).

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